

What is multiple discrimination?

Most people have multiple identities, for example, a child may also be a boy with a disability who is gay. Multiple – or 'intersectional' - discrimination occurs when someone is discriminated against because of more than one of these identities.

Why is this approach important for tackling discrimination?

The concept of multiple discrimination emerged out of criticism of the single ground approach to addressing discrimination, voiced primarily by civil society organisations in the USA, Canada and Ireland (ref). They argued that this approach ignored the complex ways in which people experience discrimination in reality.

A single ground approach to addressing discrimination confines people's identity to this one ground and fails to see people as multi-faceted. Trafficking, for example, has been defined as a gender issue. This neglects the strong racial aspect of the phenomenon and the ways in which race interacts with gender to make certain people more vulnerable to being trafficked. Children illustrate the idea of multiple discrimination clearly: most children are discriminated against because of their age, and for many, this is compounded by discrimination on another ground, for example because they are a refugee.

Recognising people's different identities has important implications for how discrimination is dealt with in practice. Complaints mechanisms in most countries, for example, are separated into anti-race, anti-age, anti-sex, etc discrimination procedures. This means that individuals have to choose between their different identities when they want to lodge a complaint on multiple grounds, and to argue their case on the strongest ground available to them. In other cases, attributing one identity to people may encourage them to identify with a disadvantage they do not feel. .

A single ground approach also fails to consider how different identities interact. People may not be accepted by other people who share one of their identities because of their other communities with which they are associated.

The multiple discrimination approach can also help to explain why one individual experiences discrimination on one ground, yet another person from the same place does not. A woman from a disadvantaged socio-economic background in South Asia, for example, is likely to experience inequality with men in many aspects of her life e.g. in survival, income and decision-making. However, another woman from the same place who has good socio-economic conditions may not experience discrimination at all: India, Pakistan and Bangladesh have all had female heads of State, where many other countries in which women do not experience inequality in survival, income or decision-making, have not (Amartya Sen).

Taking a multiple discrimination perspective also sheds light on *who* discriminates. A study by Stonewall shows that people who discriminate against any ethnic minority are twice as likely to discriminate against gay or lesbian people and four times as likely to discriminate against people with disabilities (2001).

Note: recent criticism of the multiple discrimination approach has argued that it still encourages dividing identity into boxes rather than looking at identity as a fluid process which invite

discrimination in many different ways. In practical terms, it is important to be keep in mind that the construction of identity is a dynamic process and discrimination can be experienced in many different ways.

How is multiple discrimination being addressed?

Most countries do not have legislation which prohibits multiple discrimination. Austria, Spain and Germany and Romania are among countries that do address this issue (though children are not explicitly mentioned in any of these). The Romanian Equal Treatment Act (2006), for example, covers the grounds of age, disability, race and ethnic origin, religion and belief, and sexual orientation. The Act provides that discrimination on two or more grounds is to be treated as an “aggravating circumstance”.

Many national anti-discrimination bodies are now restructuring to form a single equality body to improve responses to multiple discrimination.

Read case studies of initiatives to deal with multiple discrimination in different countries in [*Tackling Multiple Discrimination - practices, policies and laws*](#). Examples include that of Ireland's working group on equality proofing, or the Equal Treatment Committee of the Danish Institute for Human Rights which brings together civil society and governmental organisations, etc representing different grounds of discrimination to find a common ground to promote equal treatment from a cross-ground perspective.